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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/MARCHESE/HARDING

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TAGS: PGOV PREL PTER LE IS SY

SUBJECT: LEBANON: U/S FORE MEETS WITH PM SINIORA, WHO
URGES ACTION ON SHEBAAA

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman. Reason: Section 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Prime Minister Siniora expressed his appreciation for the U.S. support extended to his government, but stated that if Islamic extremism is to be countered, it is imperative to see movement on the Middle East peace process, and in the specific case of Lebanon, some sign that the UN will take action on Shebaaa Farms, as mentioned in UNSCR 1701.

Concerning the International Tribunal and the difficulty in getting it through the Lebanese cabinet and Parliament, Siniora said he is speaking with the Russian ambassador to gauge what Russia's reaction would be if his government asked the UN Security Council to establish the international Tribunal under Chapter VII of the UN Charter. Siniora wants to be certain that such a proposal would be adopted by the UNSC before he risks the political controversy it would create in Lebanon. End summary.

¶2. (U) Prime Minister Fouad Siniora received Under Secretary Henrietta Fore and the Ambassador at the Grand Serail in Beirut on November 28. The confident and relaxed prime minister was accompanied by senior advisors Mohammad Chatah and Roula Nouraddine. Minister of Telecommunications Marwan Hamadeh, a close political ally of Siniora who was the target of an assassination attempt in October 2004, joined the meeting while it was in progress. NEA Executive Director Edward Alford, M Staff Assistant Alison Shorter-Lawrence and emboffs also attended.

"I WILL DEFEND LEBANON'S DEMOCRACY
TO THE LAST DROP OF MY BLOOD"

¶3. (C) Siniora welcomed Under Secretary Fore and expressed his gratitude for the support the U.S. has extended to his government, specifically pointing to statements made by President Bush after the assassination of Industry Minister Pierre Gemayel. Siniora remarked that when he looked around at the funeral of Gemayel, he couldn't help but reflect on the many families which have suffered from assassinations over the past two years in Lebanon. Despite the violence inflicted, however, Siniora assured his guests that democratic Lebanon would persevere in its quest for full sovereignty and independence. Siniora confided that he has no great thirst for the office he occupies, but as long as he remains prime minister, he promised to defend his country's

democracy with his life. Referring to the imminent start of street demonstrations by Hizballah, Siniora indicated that while any group in Lebanon has the constitutional right to campaign for its causes, "no one has the right to take our country over the edge into violence."

SHEBAA FARMS - A MEANS TO AN END

¶4. (C) While appreciative of U.S. efforts, PM Siniora emphasized that deeds would be more effective than words at this critical juncture. Specifically, he asked for movement on the issue of Shebaa Farms, using UNSCR 1701 as the vehicle for progress. Siniora argued that not only was withdrawal of Israeli forces from Shebaa "long overdue," but it may now be almost too late. He maintained that each month that passes without even discussion of the issue by the international community makes it appear to the Lebanese people that its inclusion in UNSCR 1701 was not made in good faith. Siniora argued that 1701 authorizes the UN Secretary General to raise the issue for discussion and that such action would be in line with the international community's calls for the resolution to be implemented in its entirety as soon as possible.

¶5. (C) As he has in many other meetings, PM Siniora contended that even simply addressing the issue would be an extremely useful tool with which to combat Syrian interference in Lebanon. Arguing that it would be "a small price for a large result," Siniora said it would prove to the skeptical Arab street that the forces of moderation, negotiation, and democratic process were more effective at achieving results than the violence of the Syrian regime or the threats of Hizballah. Siniora underscored that he was

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not asking Shebaa be handed to the Lebanese but, per his "seven points" of July, rather be placed under UN custodianship until border demarcation can be done sometime in the future.

¶6. (C) In response to a question on how he felt the political situation would develop in the coming days, Siniora said that his country and its democratic government had survived an extremely difficult war, the pressures of a humanitarian crisis, and now, the demands of reconstruction. He also believed his democratic government had achieved a just end to the war and hope for the future, if 1701 could be fully implemented. But those achievements were now under serious threat from Syria, Iran, and Hizballah -- all of whom were being foolishly assisted by Michel Aoun.

¶7. (C) Accordingly, not only was visible movement needed on Shebaa, but the U.S. and the other Western nations had to send clear, strong messages to both Iran and Syria that interference in Lebanon would be resolutely and unhesitatingly opposed. Siniora stated that Syria, in particular, had to be unmistakably warned that its campaign of intimidation and violence against democratic forces in Lebanon ("...actually a coup d'etat...") would elicit a steep and unavoidable price. He suggested that Turkey and Pakistan in particular would be useful messengers in warning the Syrians.

¶8. (C) The Prime Minister related how in his recent phone call with President Bush, following the assassination of Pierre Gemayel, the President had assured Siniora that the U.S. and its allies would not "trade away" Lebanon under any circumstances. Siniora said he believed that promise, but urgently asked that this message be made unmistakably clear to the Syrians. He indicated he understood the debate in the United States about whether to engage with Syria and possibly Iran on regional issues, but Siniora trusted that the U.S. would not "sacrifice" his country.

ARAB WORLD INCREASINGLY MORE POLARIZED

¶10. (C) The Prime Minister declared that the Arab world was becoming dangerously polarized between moderates and radical fundamentalists, with the fundamentalists gaining ground. Whether justified or not, he spoke of the increasing sense of desperation and humiliation on the Arab street that boded ill not only for the U.S. role in the region, but also for overall East-West relations. And although he conceded that valid arguments could be made for alternative causes, the fact remained that underlying the growth of Islamic fundamentalism was the widely-accepted Arab perception that the persistence of the Arab-Israeli conflict was the primary cause for their distress.

¶11. (C) PM Siniora urged the U.S. to consider a concerted new effort to resolve this nearly 60-year-old conflict. He asked how many more wars were necessary before Israel realized it would never achieve peace and security through conflict. He insisted that Arab moderates, who were under increasing pressure, already accepted the existence of Israel and were willing to make the hard choices that would come with a just peace agreement, but he also warned that time was running out before the growth of radical Islam would overwhelm any chance for success.

¶12. (C) Siniora stated that he trusted the "good offices" of the U.S. in the search for peace and believed it was still within reach, but a genuine effort had to be started soon and pushed as hard as possible toward a just resolution. As a veteran politician and close associate of many leaders in the region, Siniora assured his guests that a successful peace process would change the region in almost unimaginable ways -- opening the region to real progress, democratic rule, openness to other cultures, and not least, the inevitable demise of religious extremism. And as a further consequence important to America, he concluded the future of democracy in both Iraq and Afghanistan would be immeasurably strengthened.

INTERNATIONAL TRIBUNAL -
AN APPEAL TO THE UNSYG

¶13. (C) When asked whether he would consider sending a

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letter to UNSYG Kofi Annan that would request the Security Council to direct the establishment of the International Tribunal (without the requirement for further GOL approvals), PM Siniora acknowledged he was seriously considering such an initiative. But before taking such a provocative step (for Lebanon), Siniora first wanted to know its chances for adoption by the Security Council. He wanted to be assured of success. Toward that end, Siniora said he is currently in contact with the Government of Russia through its ambassador to determine their position. The Prime Minister indicated he was also speaking with other countries, mentioning Egypt and Saudi Arabia, to further gauge reaction. He also said that he wanted to be scrupulously correct constitutionally, so he was seeking legal advice on how he might be able to send such a letter to the UN directly.

¶14. (C) He dispassionately analyzed the chances of shepherding further approval for the Tribunal through the complex Lebanese process: a staunchly pro-Syrian president, a feckless speaker of parliament, a committed foe in Hassan Nasrallah, and an opportunistic and ambitious Michel Aoun. Those factors, combined with a deadline of the soon-to-expire parliamentary session, made it imperative to have an alternative means to establish the Tribunal -- critical, because its successful establishment and operation would send an unmistakable and unexpected message to Syria that political violence could no longer be committed with impunity.

¶15. (C) PM Siniora said the initial indication from the Russian government was "neither yes, nor no" -- a position he

did not consider altogether discouraging. The Prime Minister indicated he may soon visit Russia to further explore the issue and hopefully, to receive a favorable commitment. He also said that his legal advisors were researching the constitutionality of the issue so that he did not inadvertently find himself in a corner of his own making.

¶116. (C) Regardless of the fate of the Tribunal, Siniora assured the Under Secretary that democratic forces in Lebanon were determined to protect their country's sovereignty. He stated with confidence that the majority of the people of Lebanon were behind the governing March 14 group and referred to recent elections in various universities and labor unions as tangible proof of this support. But once again, he urged the U.S. to complement its words with deeds, specifically on the all-important issues of Shebaa and the issuance of clear, strong messages of non-interference to Syria and Iran.

FELTMAN